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Hermeneutics and the capabilities approach: a thick heuristic tool for a thin normative standard of well-being

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Hermeneutics and the capabilities approach: a thick heuristic tool for a thin normative standard of well-being¹

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This paper argues for the way in which the hermeneutics of human action (in particular the technical dimension of action) and the capabilities approach are to be coordinated in judgements regarding the happy life or well-being. To ensure that this hypothesis is not only philosophically plausible but practically reasonable, I apply it throughout to practical examples, namely practices related to the arrangement of space. I argue that judgement regarding happiness or well-being requires two distinct forms of reflection: (1) a hermeneutics (here derived from Ricœur) that can do justice to the thickness (in Geertz's sense) of human living and (2) a thin standard (in Walzer's sense) of universal human functional capabilities, by which to point out which insufficient conditions for action undermine human well-being (here presented according to Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach). These two forms of reflection, it will be argued, are theoretically compatible, yet remain – in practice – in tension. Recognition of this tension has to accompany responsible judgement.

Introduction

If there is something like happiness – or well-being, as I prefer to translate Aristotle's *eudaimonia* in order to avoid the idea of an ephemeral, emotive state of mind – then it is not to be found in the form of theoretical conclusions, supported by sound argumentation, but in the form of a life lived well in the world. The concern from which my contribution stems is not this inevitable distinctness, but rather the question of how to relate the particular practice that *theorising* itself is to other domains of human life. For is the reflective suspension of action not a possible first step by which to engage in practice *inter alia* to improve one's own and others' well-being?

This paper could be described as an essay in practical philosophy: in it I will make explicit the practical value of my theoretical work. For some time now I have been interested in how people engage understandingly with their world. In particular, I have explored the technical dimension of this engagement through a hermeneutics of the technical dimension of action, inspired by the later work of Paul Ricœur (see Wolff 2006, 2012a, 2013; and pp. 489–492 below). This being the case, the concern can be formulated as follows: how can the theoretical work of a philosophical hermeneuticist improve the quality of real-life interventions in people's happiness or well-being?² I invite the reader to consider the features of human life in produced spaces as a test case: how could a hermeneutics of the technicity of action inform decisions relating to the construction and adjustment of space, for instance in the practices of urban design, architecture and interior design (of hospitals, schools, factories, office spaces, homes, etc.)?

- 1 This article was completed partially during my time as guest researcher with Prof. Axel Honneth at the Goethe University, Frankfurt, in 2013/14. I hereby express my gratitude to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for the grant, which made this research visit possible. I would also like to thank Luce Thoumin, the reviewers and the guest editors for valuable commentary on the article.
- 2 Drawing partially on the same hermeneutics of the technicity of action, I have contributed to an attempt to indicate the relevance thereof in the domain of mobile telephony and health services (Murray & Wolff unpublished). In that paper another route of argumentation is explored, but its conclusions could be read as complementary to those reached here.

I will argue that ‘being well’ is a species of practical understanding of one’s own and of others’ quality of living within certain environments, where environments are not only socially and symbolically, but also technically shaped. The substantivised adverb ‘well-being’ is applied reflectively as one’s interpretation of someone’s quality of being. Being well can plausibly be presented as a form of understanding only if the mutual implication of understanding and everyday human existence is given due attention: existence is the condition under which human beings learn and exercise understanding (in this sense understanding depends on existence), but human existence is always shaped by the fact that it is engaging ‘understandingly’ in the world (and in this sense understanding qualifies forms of existence).³ The quality of existing-understanding (which can be judged worthy or unworthy of well-being) thus depends to a large degree on the quality of people’s actions. Insofar as that is the case, it depends (1) on the range of capabilities of the agent and (2) on the environment in which the agent is confronted with means of enforcing or obstructing his or her capabilities. The range of such *contextual conditions* varies between the poles of:

- enablement to engage in the environment
- oppression by means of rigorous discipline.

Corresponding with these is the range of *interactions* allowed for by the environment, ranging between the poles of:

- being-at-home in a place
- forced adaptation to a space.

Underlying these ranges of possibilities is the question regarding those (practical, understanding) capabilities the deficiency of which makes a moral appeal to others. Nussbaum’s capabilities approach provides us with a perspective on the normatively minimal requirements for being well within a place. I suggest that the (ideally) descriptively neutral hermeneutic of the technicity of action and aspects from the normative orientation of the capabilities approach could reinforce each other: the evaluative potential of the normative theory will supplement the descriptive theory and the interpretational and heuristic potential of the descriptive theory will improve the normative theory’s engagement with practice. The entire enterprise relies on the centrality of the human being as active, as agent.

The hermeneutic circle of technical agent, means and usage, or: the hermeneutical ‘thickness’ of engagement in technical environments

One of the greatest lessons of twentieth-century hermeneutics is that understanding is not only something that happens when people read texts (Schleiermacher and earlier), or even when they consciously strive to gain intellectual access to social phenomena (Dilthey), but understanding happens all of the time in the life of all human beings (Heidegger) (see Ricœur 1986: pp. 83–111; Grondin 2006: pp. 14–42). Understanding is part of the very fibre of human existence. It is a much larger phenomenon than a mental activity of conscious thinking – the latter is only a derived form of understanding. Understanding is most of the time and most originally situated on the pre-reflective level of human situatedness and interaction with the surroundings. The largest part of the disclosure of intelligibility happens in a non-thematised manner – most often we simply bathe in intelligibility thanks to the understanding quality of our existence, as we act out our lives.

If all understanding thus depends on the complex network of experiences and actions that weaves daily existence, then the study of *human technicity in particular* focuses on the aspect of understanding that happens when:

- (1) the human being as technical agent (without claiming that agency is only technical)
- (2) engages with technical means (without claiming that the environment is only technical)
- (3) by being affected by one’s surroundings and by acting (without claiming that all action is technical).

3 In accordance with one of the basic tenets of Heideggerian hermeneutics. Space does not allow me to develop the important qualifications, related for instance to infancy or to radical passivity.

I here use ‘understanding’ for the tacit, pre-predicative aspect of human existence as a hermeneutic event; ‘interpretation’ refers to the reflective, predicative specialisation of the human hermeneutic existence (see Wolff 2013 on this distinction in the context of a hermeneutics of the technicity of action). Often in action both are involved at the same time in a relation of mutual implication. For this reason it will suffice when I use ‘interpretation’ in the remainder of this article to refer to both.

The hermeneutics of human technicity is not an exhaustive study of the events of understanding: it merely focuses on the technical aspect and takes other aspects of understanding – such as the social or the symbolic aspects – into account as they are needed. Drawing principally from Paul Ricœur's phenomenological hermeneutics of narratives and texts, an account of understanding in human technicity may be developed as follows.⁴

The human being as technical agent

Technical understanding remains unintelligible if the person who engages through action with an environment is not considered part of the technical system. This doesn't mean at all that the human being is reduced to or degraded to a kind of technical artefact, to a cog in the machine (as argued in Wolff 2010, 2012b). What it does mean is that without the human being – and in particular the human body that has over time acquired skills that it can deploy in an array of situations – there would be no technical events and certainly no understanding of technology. This aspect of the human being has been presented under different names throughout history: bodily technics (*techniques du corps*), *habitus* or *hexis*. These bodily technics are acquired throughout life since babyhood and are often taken for granted, for example walking (into a building), sitting (on a park bench), holding (a door knob), turning (a tap), pushing (to open a window), speaking, but also coordinating vision and hearing, persevering, waiting (for a traffic light), resisting and composure. Bodily technics can form only through a process of learning or habituation of one's body (what it is capable of and what not, and what not yet) to itself and to typical objects and material qualities (heat, texture, weight, form, etc.). All bodily technics have a social dimension and a dimension of individual, personal style (as argued in Wolff 2013: pp. 52–53).

There is no interpretation of the constructed environment as a technical environment that does not depend, directly or indirectly, on an agent that has acquired bodily technics – that is, capabilities and dispositions to act in certain ways when confronted with certain features, events and artefacts of the arranged environment.⁵ It is through the combination of a *habitus* of action and its routine or improvised deployment that one understands or interprets any organised space as a *place*. The bodily technics are the incarnate prejudices (in the Gadamerian sense) with which we approach our environment and which predispose us to act in intelligible ways and to disclose the potential of the place for us. We dispose of such a 'vocabulary' of typical actions that we spontaneously connect with one another on provocation by the demands of a particular situation. By these habituated actions we become familiar with different kinds of environments. 'Dwelling' is acquaintedness with any spatial context through the bodily technics. They give access to a significant number of the possibilities for action in a place and to a significant familiarity with the limits of one's possibilities in that place. Place is space in which one dwells.⁶

The means by which and among which agents act

The technical means is also a social and even a symbolic reality – all technical systems are always socio-technical systems. One may give account of this fact by distinguishing between the (instrumental) logistics and (social) strategy of technical events (cf. Debray 2000: pp. 126–127) or, in more 'technical' parlance, between artefactual hardware and organisational software (Rip 1995: p. 17). A library, for instance, is not only a building that houses shelves and books, but also an organisational structure, which describes how it is supposed to run and according to which it is approximately run in practice (in the case of a functioning library). Against the background of this interwovenness of the social and the technical in socio-technical systems, a decisive characteristic of the technical means can be identified. It is the *autonomy* of technical means. As long as we

4 In order to launch the current argument I give a schematic summary here of what has been worked out in detail elsewhere (see Wolff 2006, 2012a; Murray & Wolff unpublished). Note also that in order to highlight the hermeneutic aspect of this project, Ricœur's anthropology of the capable human being (cf. Ricœur 1990) will be referred to only briefly (but cf. Wolff 2011: ch. 9; 2013; Wolff forthcoming).

5 Even interpretation of representations of places, for example when one reads a building's plan or a map, is derivative of the bodily acquaintedness that one has with the world.

6 Which is not to be romanticised into a cosy being-at-home straightaway – see the discussion of adaptation later in the article. Arguably, the standard references for the philosophical history of 'place' and for a phenomenology of space and place are Casey (1997 and 1993, respectively).

restrict our perspective to the technical means, independent from the event of its usage, it is 'autonomous', in other words it has in principle lost its links with the context of:

- the inventor and producer
- the original historical, social and cultural situation of its invention and production
- the person(s) for whom it was originally created.⁷

This entails that, abstracted or decontextualised from the functioning socio-technical system, the technical means or environment has no meaning in itself. It can reacquire meaning only by being recontextualised, that is, by being reintegrated in a framework of use, albeit one that could be a different kind of project from the one originally intended. If we do not take the autonomy of the technical artefact seriously, we will make the mistake of thinking that the real meaning or use of a technical artefact, such as a building or a city landscape of roads, is to be found in the intention of its architect, or in the original conditions for its construction, or in the intention of the person who commissioned it, and that this is the exhaustive content of the meaning of these places. In this way a plethora of *de facto* interpretations of these spaces will get lost. However, this myriad of real interpretations of spaces become visible only in the concrete events of interpretation, that is, in the events by which they are reappropriated and recontextualised.

Yet, this does not imply that any technical artefact can be made to have any meaning whatsoever. Technical means rather tend to open up enlarged possibilities of action in some regards and narrow down others.⁸ This does not determine its use, and even less its interpretation by all future users. For example, the system of trains in a city makes transport through the city easier, but obliges people to move exclusively from one station to another. That does not prevent someone from using a train as a place to make music to make extra money (rather than as a means of transport). Or again, the technical system that safeguards the integrity of a country's borders facilitates entry for some by means of legal documents, ports of entry, etc., and makes it difficult for other 'meritorious' individuals to enter, but in neither case can this system determine the uses that people will make of the entry gained.

It is precisely because technical means can have this double facilitation–obstruction effect on human action that designers attempt to manipulate their qualities. However, typical of such design efforts is the trade-off between desired and undesired effects. Positive aspects of design can have negative effects – air-conditioning makes it easier to work in a stable and comfortable office climate, but can only do so at the expense of cutting workers off from the natural external climate and circulating health hazards. Conversely, negative aspects of design can have positive effects – dense urban habitation makes people feel caged in, but makes it easier to establish a system of public transport.

Events of interpretation by acting

Technical means have meaning only in the event of being confronted with a person who acts on them, uses them through the deployment of bodily technics (among others), places them in a new project, and recontextualises them. For the artefact 'piano' to become a musical instrument, I have to use it *as* a musical instrument (and not for instance merely as a shelf on which to place flower vases). That is, I have to play the piano. One 'plays' any artefact when one uses it *as* a 'this or that', within a certain project (cf. Heidegger 1993: §§32–33; Breitling 2002). For this reason, I also 'play' the piano in a broader sense when I place flower vases on it, but then I play it as a flower shelf to decorate my living room, not as a musical instrument. Using something *as* something is, then, the act of technological interpretation.⁹

Whether this happens through routinised usage or as part of a consciously planned project may be important in practice,¹⁰ but neither excludes the other as a defining condition for the interpretative interaction with artefacts or the environment. At its minimal level – for instance, being in an air-conditioned shop – one may be unaware of the fact that one's relation to the environment is technologically mediated and the understanding boils down to nothing more than 'finding oneself'

7 These characteristics of 'autonomy' are directly borrowed from Ricœur's theory of textual autonomy (cf. Ricœur 1986: pp. 124–125).

8 This double effect of amplification and reduction of human actional capabilities by the technical means has been described by Don Ihde (1979: pp. 38, 48; 1990: p. 78).

9 A piano that merely stands in a remote corner, with no thought given to its use year after year, is in the state of 'autonomy'.

10 On this distinction, see the coordination of 'primary technicity' and 'secondary technicity' in Wolff (2012b, 2013).

in this or that way,¹¹ for example in the slightly improved ambiance of cooled air. Usage as understanding does not necessarily imply conscious adoption in a project.

Furthermore, the event of understanding of technical artefacts, like that of anything else, depends on the way in which the interpreter consciously or unconsciously structures the relation between the detail to be interpreted and the context in which it is to be interpreted. Thus, any part of the technical aspect of place could be situated on a scale of contexts that fit into each other: for instance, from the small scale of one's personal use of a window, to the building, to the city, to the country and to the world (cf. Ropohl 2009: pp. 107–117) and any one of these juxtaposed to other windows, buildings, cities, etc., and thus situated within a constellation of different spaces that form the different horizons within which artefacts are interpreted in a particular practical context. Orientation in a place means knowing to a practically relevant degree your way around in a world of spaces (which is significantly shaped by artefacts).

Thus far I have mostly restricted my view to individual agents. However, nobody interprets by himself or herself: I always act as a member of a group or team (for example, celebrating together in a wedding venue), or of a mass of agents (such as driving in peak-hour traffic in a big city), or at least as an agent that has acquired specific acting abilities partially through social processes of learning. In other words, interpretation through action is to a high degree co-interpretation, either because one acts in coordination with others or because one's way of acting interpretively has been formed by culturally specific processes. How does one get permission to enter someone's home? In the part of the world where I live this could entail different things. (1) Two generations ago in a suburb: go to the house and knock on the door. (2) Today in a suburb: you cannot knock on the door because the security fences bars one from access to the premises; phone and make an appointment to have the door opened for you. (3) Rural areas of the former Venda homeland two decades ago: don't knock (do you want to break down the door?!), there are no phones, so stand on the pavement and call out a greeting. All of these are socially acquired technical customs; contingent ways of getting access to a friend's house of which the door, in all three cases, may work exactly in the same way. (Purely technically speaking, all three strategies might work in all three contexts, albeit with different degrees of efficiency.) Just as the recontextualising usage of technical means is thus socially situated, it is equally and simultaneously situated (that is, formed) by the technical milieu.

From this, it should be clear that technical understanding is only one of a number of possible simultaneously valid understandings of technical means and events. I propose that there are three such understandings of technical systems:

- (1) The *technical* understanding of technical means, that is, the understanding by which the internal coherence of elements, materials, qualities, movements, etc., in their autonomous form is interpreted. This is, for instance, how the engineer understands the drawings of a skyscraper or how a town planner designs a new development. Although this form of understanding of technical means may enhance one's ability to use certain technical artefacts, or sometimes even be the only way in which one could gain such capability (for instance, using a map to find your way around an unfamiliar city), very often this is not required to make use of an object in a technical manner (a patient may be able to rest on a hospital bed without knowing the institution's laundry-cleaning infrastructure).
- (2) Understanding through *usage*, that is the conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional integration of means within agents' flow of action. This is a socially informed understanding that depends on the contingencies of the agent and context of usage and, of course, on the bodily technics.
- (3) A *symbolic* understanding that discloses the reference that technical means and events have to social norms, aesthetic preferences, cultural traditions, legal requirements, etc.¹²

11 For this reason 'finding oneself' is to be considered integral to the technicity of *action* (e.g. in usage), even if, taken in isolation, it is not an action. On the significance of such experiences of 'finding oneself' see Heidegger on *Sich-befinden* (1993: pp. 142, 340).

12 I support my claims regarding these three dimensions of the understanding involved in human-means interactions from the preceding exposition in hermeneutics. However, it is not trivial to note that the three forms of reference echo the three major categories of excellence in design as taught in architectural theory since Vitruvius. His categories of firmness (*firmitas*), commodity (*utilitas*) and delight (*venustas*) can be said to represent the sought-after excellence in the facilitation of people's understanding of interaction with the built environment. Far from being a mere historical curiosity, the importance of these three categories of excellence for current

In a myriad of ways the agent's complex of capabilities is then pitted against the particularities of a specific context – that is, against the things that constitute that context. This event is the original source of the threefold understanding in the technical engagement with one's environment. Ultimately, through the deployment of one's capabilities in action and the threefold understanding, the very basis of the possibility of an understanding existence is interpreted. What is interpreted, or disclosed through the technical activity, is the (at least) implicit answer to the questions: *Who am I as agent (as I reveal myself in this particular context)? What am I capable of (in interaction with these means and with other co-agents)?* When one starts to consider what is implied in these questions and their mostly implicit, lived-through answers, the list is remarkably long:

- (1) one's personal identity (your social roles of age, gender, [sub]culture, etc.)
- (2) one's typical appropriation of certain kinds of situations and milieus (that is, your general orientation in the world)
- (3) what one considers possible and impossible (personal projects and desires)
- (4) the latter also draws on what has previously been acquired and thus involves in part the narrative of historical deployment of possibilities and in this way reactivates the archive of personal identity
- (5) one's moral agency (for example, the capacity to regularly face up to challenging situations by virtuous action)
- (6) but also, important for the current context, being at home or being well in a place.

All of these human realities are formed and informed in one way or another (albeit not exhaustively) by the interpretive interaction between the human being and his or her environment. Given that such a substantial part of human existence is affected by one's competence and means of interaction with the living environment, the quality of this interaction impacts on the quality of one's life in general.

This series of human realities that are implicated in the hermeneutic spiral shows that such a hermeneutic theory is concerned with giving an account of the full richness, or 'thickness' (in the sense of Geertz 2000) of human interpreting existence, instead of reducing it to a 'thin' description of abstract, supratemporal generalities. Every theory generalises, but the effort of hermeneutics is directed at safeguarding the particularities of human enmeshment and engagement in reality as far as possible. Hermeneutics is a constant reminder and call to openness to people's daily, contingently interpreting and strategic action in a multi-layered and faceted context of interpretation. 'Well-being' is an aspect of this *thickness* of human engagement with the world, and to this I now turn.

'Well-being' and the ambiguous condition of its assessment

The notion of 'thickness' as deployed in the interpretative sciences evokes the difficult task of interpretation in the face of ambiguity, irreducible complexity or even indeterminacy of the phenomena that are examined. The all-too-short rendering above of the hermeneutic constitution of human beings (with special reference to their spatial situation) should at least have mapped out the central issues involved in an attempt to do justice to this thickness. The attribution of the quality of well-ness to the hermeneutic beings that we as humans are should be as 'thick' an issue as our hermeneutic existence itself. Before we get to some of the difficulties associated with well-being as a thick notion, let me first clarify the specific use of the notion 'well-being' or 'happiness' that I propose for current purposes.¹³

The abstract noun 'well-being' substantialises an adverbial quality that can be attributed to the event of people's existence. In the terms of my hermeneutics of the technicity of action, the adverbial qualification encapsulated in 'well-being' can be attributed to the interpreting existence of human beings as they interact with others, with the means at their disposal, and in the environments constructed around them. This term seems appropriate (as Aristotle already claimed for *eudaimonia*) not for small incidents or episodes, but rather for longer stretches of the story of somebody's life; it would properly qualify that long stretch of life, even if there were incidents

spatial infrastructure creation is explicitly recognised (under the names of built quality, functionality and impact) by the Design Quality Indicator, developed and managed by the British Construction Industry Council (n.d.). In this way, my exposition of the dimensions of understanding involved in our relation to the means of spatial creation already hints at the normative considerations discussed in the last section of this paper (pp. 488–489).

13 For other perspectives one could consult, for instance, the invaluable overview on Quality of Life studies by Sirgy et al (2006).

or episodes that were not too pleasant or fulfilling (but without being downright catastrophic). ‘Well-being’ could thus be said to be the conclusion to or summary of a *positive assessment of someone’s life, with respect to the person’s way of existing interpretively, with others, in a particular social, symbolic, but also technical context*. This assessment depends on distinguishing the quality of a particular life from mere perpetuation of the biological existence of a specimen of the *Homo sapiens* species: ‘well-being’ refers to a sufficient degree of flourishing and not merely to the perseverance in existence.¹⁴ The absence of ‘well-being’, whatever its dimensions in a specific historical context may be, is likely to provoke sympathy and pity in onlookers, but sometimes also disgust, shame, indignation and other negative feelings, all of which inform the ethical overtone of the notion ‘well-being’. In assessing the quality of people’s relation to their environment – their well-being in space – a similar ethical overtone is reflected in certain uses of the well-known distinction between (mere) space and space in which one is well, called ‘place’.

If we now turn from the term attributed to the events of its attribution, the thickness of well-being comes to the fore even more clearly. We all know that the assessment of ‘well-being’ could be made by somebody of (1) his or her own life, or (2) of the life of someone else. Furthermore, in both cases, this assessment can (i) be carried out on the prereflective level, as non-explicit, lived-out assessment, or (ii) it could be explicitly, consciously formulated. One of the biggest challenges in attributing ‘well-being’ to someone’s life is to coordinate the internal and external assessment (1 and 2) and also the implicit and explicit assessment (i and ii) of somebody’s life. There are a myriad of reasons for this being so difficult. I will highlight only two that are intimately linked to the structure of interpreting action explained above (and still restricted to my central question of a hermeneutics of the technicity of action applied to space):

- (1) The range of a person’s capabilities (what a person can do or how a person can live) depends on *two* factors: the *internal* acquisition (or lack of acquisition) of bodily skills and the *external* environment that allows or prohibits someone from using them. Given that both the internal skills and the external environment are *changing* and historically contingent, and given that the real phenomenon of a human action is only the product of the *encounter* of these two (what I have called ‘playing’), the lack of ability to act in such a way as to call up the assessment of well-being can be differently evaluated depending on one’s perspective: either it is an inadequacy of the agent (internal perspective), or it is a shortcoming of the environment (external perspective), or it is both; a lack of well-being with respect to how somebody dwells could be considered to be due to either a deficiency in the know-how of the person or to deficiencies in the environment, or both.
- (2) Bodily technics, acquired through social and technical disciplining, render people capable of maximising the possibilities of action within a particular context. However, the acquisition of this ability to act efficiently is necessarily ambiguous: it could be seen (i) as enablement to engage with the environment, or (ii) as oppression by means of rigorous discipline. If ‘dwelling’ encapsulates the way in which someone habitually lives in a familiar place, then this ambiguity could equally be expressed as that between (a) being or making oneself at home in a place and (b) forced adaptation to an environment.

Thus, just as there are complexities and ambiguities in proposing a thick rendering of people’s situation in their living space, so there are uncertainties involved in assessing the well-being of a person or a group. It is of utmost importance to note that these two forms of uncertainty result from the finiteness of our human condition and *cannot be resolved at a theoretical level*. The very hermeneutic approach by which one may want to do justice to the thickness of human existence reveals the uncertainty and ambiguity that so often characterise the thoughtful attribution of this qualification, ‘well-being’. One nevertheless has to work one’s way through this difficulty; it cannot be avoided, it can only be *faced and responded to in practice*. If a study such as the current one has any value for acting agents, then it would be accompanying the practical task of assessing people’s well-being and intervening in their ability to improve their well-being under these conditions of uncertainty.

My underlying wager is that in the ethical dilemmas implied in these uncertainties, greater hermeneutic attentiveness may well fare better in aiding people to respond in appropriate ways

14 On the possible ways by which to fill in the detail of the happy life, see Smith’s catalogue of views on the good life in Sirgy et al. (2006: p. 356).

to practical situations, than whatever forms of thought that do not allow for these uncertainties to appear. As tenacity in attentiveness, a hermeneutic approach would help not only in *accurate description*, but also in *heuristic sensitivity*.¹⁵ However, this declaration of conviction will remain mere good intention when it is not confronted with the very real conditions under which decisions about well-being have to be made. In practice, one cannot dwell forever on every single case and often one cannot go back to improve what has been done; one often cannot avoid thinking about people in general (rather than about specific individuals); likewise, many interventions can only be designed for the average person rather than for a specific individual.

These considerable difficulties associated with the evaluation of a person's well-being in general, and his or her well-being insofar as it concerns the spatial existence of that person, are a concern for anybody working in the domain of the creation of space: architects, decorators, urbanists, etc. What kind of reflection on the stakes of intervening in the well-being of others would be of value to such people? Supposing that such professionals all act in good faith, what they would ideally need is a normative standard that would have universal validity (or as close to this as possible) in order to help them assess the well-being of people's lives and to make benevolent interventions (measured against such criteria). Yet such a universal standard would at the same time have to be able to accommodate the particularities and contingencies of each individual person's interpreting encounter with the world. Or, to state the principle in the terms of the preceding discussion: because the capabilities to act form a major part of interpretation in people's lives, but not all capabilities bear testimony to well-being, one needs a sophisticated way of distinguishing those capabilities to act and those spatial arrangements that contribute to well-being from those that don't, and then in such a way that creators of space impose as little as possible their own, particular cultural prejudices on the existence of others. How do we deal with these two theoretically contradictory *desiderata*?

Basic functional capabilities as 'thin' normative standard for well-being

In what follows I will *not* attempt to *resolve* this ambiguity. It is simply part of our human condition that will always make the assessment of well-being a somewhat risky enterprise. Rather, I will argue that this risk can be met responsibly with the help of my hermeneutics of technology in combination with Martha Nussbaum's account of the so-called 'capabilities approach'.¹⁶ True, hers is a theory of justice, but it offers a guideline that could help us in reflecting on issues of well-being, also regarding technical action and place. Just as she proposes the 'capabilities approach' as a *partial* theory of the good (Nussbaum 2000: p. 76), I will recontextualise her thought with a view to a *partial* theory of well-being.¹⁷ It will be *partial* in the sense that it meets the requirement spelled out at the end of the previous section: it makes a claim to universal validity for the minimum requirements of justice (cf. Nussbaum 2006: pp. 70–75) or well-being and leaves open the question as to the full scope with which the notion of well-being is filled by particular actors.

In order to draw the benefits of this theory, Nussbaum's concept of *capabilities* has to be clarified first. From the outset one should accept that human beings change and therefore they seem to have no clear essence. Despite the tendency of globalisation to homogenise cultures, it remains highly problematic to judge the values of others from one's own standpoint (this is the snare of a colonising logic). However, according to Nussbaum, it is possible to identify a broad cross-cultural consensus concerning the value of human beings that, although changing in detail over time, can at any given time be considered to be fairly context-independent – and this is interesting to us. The capabilities are expressions of this likely consensus.

Nussbaum speaks of 'basic functional or central capabilities'. These are conceived of as possibilities to do something and not as needs that have to be fulfilled. A basic functional capability is a composite of:

(1) basic capabilities ('equipment'; for example, a healthy body)

¹⁵ The heuristic potential of a hermeneutics of human technicity has been proposed briefly in Murray & Wolff (unpublished) in connection with prospective responsibility.

¹⁶ My decision to use Nussbaum's version rather than Sen's is principally motivated by her more explicit development of the normatively relevant capabilities. For a study on their respective views on the central notion of capability see Lessmann (2007). A valuable overview of the capability approaches is Clark (2006).

¹⁷ For another attempt at using the capability approach for studies of well-being (drawing more on Sen) see Deneulin & McGregor (2010).

- (2) the development of such basic capabilities to internal capabilities (that is, developed states of the person that are conditions for the exercise of functions, often through external support and/or education)
- (3) internal capabilities combined with suitable external conditions to form combined, basic or central human functional capabilities.

Although the basic functional capabilities represent a wider range of capabilities than the technical ability of the skilled body, the structure of both are in essence the same. Both consist of:

- (1) having the right thing to use (for instance, healthy legs, or in the absence of healthy legs, perhaps healthy arms)
- (2) having it developed to be used (for example, for walking, or in the absence of healthy legs, arms that are capable of activating and steering a wheelchair)
- (3) having the conditions that favour its use (such as an accessible entry to building, or a wheelchair and a wheelchair ramp for those of impaired movement).

In order to realise the integration of the capabilities approach in the hermeneutics of action, the coordination between the two frameworks of reflection has to be clarified.¹⁸

- (1) Both of these ways of thinking are intimately concerned with human *capability* and elucidate it by taking into consideration the history of gradual *habituation* of the person that forms the acquired disposition and capacity to do things (bodily technics, in the one case, basic capabilities, in the other), for example spatial orientation and utilisation.
- (2) According to both views, capabilities are deployed in *contexts*, in other words, they are combined interaction of (embodied) know-how as it is activated in confrontation with a variety of differently structured situations (in this article, in particular places as technologically, but also socially and symbolically formed). The qualities of the specific spatial organisation enable or make difficult certain actions in it.
- (3) Once these similarities of perspective have been identified, it follows logically that the *quality* of the capability depends in both theories on *both* the preconfigured capability and the facilitation for its deployment by the givens of the context.
- (4) This interaction of a ‘capable’, ‘skilled’ or ‘habituated’ agent with a particular setting is always of such a nature that the technical usage entails also social and symbolic understanding that in turn feeds back to the capable agent.
- (5) For both the hermeneutic and the functional capability conception this self-interpretative loop passes through the events of interaction with others and things. The designation ‘well-being’ applies precisely to this loop – first, in the way in which one (mostly implicitly) interprets one’s own well-being, but second, it is also the terminus or ‘object’ of an external assessment concerning someone else’s well-being.

However, at this culminating point the two visions on human capability differ – a *difference* that will prove to be decisive to the current argument: the one elucidates this self-interpretational loop primarily from a hermeneutic and descriptive perspective by which the variety of capabilities and their modes of existence are placed in relief; the other offers a normative perspective by which to denounce or anticipate the *lack* of capabilities.

This last point needs elaboration. Consider the 10 combined or central functional capabilities identified by Nussbaum (2006: pp. 76–78, cited and somewhat circumscribed):

- (1) Life
- (2) Bodily health
- (3) Bodily integrity
- (4) Opportunity and ability to develop and use senses, imagination, and thought
- (5) Expression of emotions
- (6) Practical reason (planning one’s life, forming an idea of the good)

¹⁸ In accordance with the demarcation of the current paper, I will not explore the relation between Nussbaum’s notion of capability and that of Ricœur in the last phase of his oeuvre. Ricœur’s work on capability has been neglected more often than not in the debates regarding the capabilities approach(es). An interesting exception is Deneulin et al. (2006), which contains an essay by Ricœur. In Ricœur’s work, Nussbaum figures only as the author of *The Fragility of Goodness* (cf. Ricœur 1990: pp. 284–287). His discussion of ‘social capabilities’ draws on Sen (Ricœur 2004: pp. 225–231). To my knowledge, Nussbaum’s only study on Ricœur is Nussbaum (2002). On the relation between capability and fragility in Ricœur, see Savage (2013).

- (7) Affiliation
 - (i) Live with and towards others
 - (ii) 'Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation'
- (8) Concern for other species
- (9) Play, recreation and rest
- (10) Control over one's environment
 - (i) Political
 - (ii) Material.

As a partial theory of justice, Nussbaum's claim is 'substantive' or 'positive': it is part of any just dispensation that people would dispose of these capabilities as far as is humanly possible. However, Nussbaum also insists that when somebody is consistently prevented from exercising any one of these capabilities, we would have reason to suspect that the person is suffering from a lack of well-being. In severe cases it means that violence is committed against the human value of that person. The 'negative' or privative notion of 'absence' or 'lack'¹⁹ holds a key to understanding why Nussbaum's theory remains only a partial theory of justice (or well-being): despite arguing for a substantive theory of justice, this capability approach remains subtended by a deontological logic of which most of the work is done by means of negation (the 'no' to injustice or the 'minimal level of justice'). The substantive part of her theory thus remains fairly modest, although certainly not trivial. Because of this specific way in which her capabilities approach is a limited substantive theory, one may rightfully characterise it as a 'thin' theory.²⁰ We can now turn to the way in which I subscribe to this 'thin' theory.

Hermeneutics of the technicity of action and the capabilities approach: a thick heuristic tool for a thin normative standard of well-being

The problem set out at the beginning of this article concerned the question of the practical assessment of people's happiness or well-being in their relation to space. In order to accomplish this task, I proposed that we integrate the standard of well-being into the hermeneutic spiral of interpretation, and focused on the technical dimension of this spiral. Having made the case for their *theoretical* compatibility in the previous section, the stake is now their coordination in the assessment of well-being in *practice* the way in which this plays out in professions and practices related to the arrangement of space. In order to develop this point, I will insist on an inevitable *tension* between the two visions of human capability, a tension that remains effective despite their theoretical compatibility.²¹

Let us approach this question by adding two qualifications to Nussbaum's capabilities approach:

- (1) *Thick and thin*: Michael Walzer's theorisation of the relation between thin (or minimal) and thick (or maximal) moralities (Walzer 1994) should caution us against misunderstanding what can be done with Nussbaum's theory. Consider again her claim that her proposed list of central functional capabilities could draw a broad, cross-cultural consensus and that, as a partial theory of justice (or, for our purposes, well-being), it leaves enough space for culturally specific uses. One should not succumb to the temptation to think that this means that the 10 capabilities represent the core of all morality or a foundation upon which other moral systems are, or can be, constructed. Rather, the 10 capabilities are a 'substantial account of the moral minimum' and, as Nussbaum's creation, remain 'necessarily expressive of [her] own thick morality' (Walzer 1994: p. 9) or, for the same price, expressive of the thick morality of whomever will be persuaded by the argument of the present article. Thick morality is not derived from thin morality; and this thin morality has different meanings, and is differently interpreted in

¹⁹ She writes about a 'basic social minimum' or again of 'the threshold level of each capability' (Nussbaum 2006: pp. 70–71).

²⁰ Early on, Nussbaum herself characterised her theory as a 'thick vague theory of the good' (Nussbaum 1992: p. 214).

²¹ Here lies the essential difference between my attempt to relate Ricœur to the capability approach and that of Séverine Deneulin (2006). Her attempt consists in using Ricœur as a 'thickening' extension of or *complement* to the capability approach (using Sen more than Nussbaum as reference); I insist on the importance of maintaining the *tension* between the two bodies of thought and the importance of keeping the specifics (thinness or thickness) of each in play during the process of judgement. Furthermore, situating the positive fullness of the flourishing life in the hermeneutic existence, I give a markedly 'negative' reading of the use of the capabilities norm (contrary to Deneulin's [2006: p. 28] 'positive' insistence on the task of expanding capabilities).

different practical contexts by people from different persuasions and cultural backgrounds (cf. Walzer 1994: p. 17). This does not prove Nussbaum's thin normative theory to be invalid; it merely cautions us to respect the *pragmatic nature* of the deployment of these standards. Walzer convincingly argues that thin morality is constructed by people with and out of their respective thick moralities *for the purposes of a particular practical context, typically for criticism or solidarity* (Walzer 1994: pp. 10, 16). For present purposes, we could paraphrase this as: considered formally, the capabilities are the consolidation (in the format of a theory) of a likely compromise under practical conditions such as that of criticism or solidarity, and – I would add – for the sake of simplifying an otherwise overwhelmingly complex context. The point of the capabilities approach's thinness is not that fulfilment of the 10 capabilities equals a flourishing life (since they represent only the threshold requirements for a minimally good life), but that *absence* or *lack* of ability to exercise any one of them would be able to draw a compromise of overlapping moral disapproval from people with otherwise diverging forms of thick morality (cf. Nussbaum 2000: p. 76). Denouncing such absence or lack (the negation discussed at the end of the previous section, p. 496) is the discursive practice that deontology takes in response to the demands of a particular practical situation. If we accept this reading of the capabilities approach, then Walzer's observation applies here too that '[i]n moral discourse, thinness and intensity go together whereas with thickness comes qualification, compromise, complexity, and disagreement' (Walzer 1994: p. 6). This point is important for the current argument, because practitioners of spatial design will always have to hold the negative standard of capabilities in mind,²² yet never design for people whose existence can be summarised in the minimal terms of action encapsulated in this standard. At the receiving end of design stands the complex thickness of people's everyday lives – the kind of domain that hermeneutics is meant to clarify. This is the next point.

- (2) *Functioning*: In deploying their capabilities, human beings do not exist 'in a thin way', but 'in a thick way'. Nussbaum acknowledges this fact by distinguishing between (thin) *functional capabilities* and *functioning*, i.e. the (thick) practical deployment of those capabilities. Now, the normativity of her approach applies *ideally* only to the question of having acquired the capabilities and not to their functioning or practical mobilisation. In other words, if the capabilities approach provides a norm for the evaluation of well-being in people's lives, it is by evaluating what they are capable of (or exposing what they are not capable of) and not by judging the ways in which they make use of those capabilities. However, this is only *ideally* the case, because the relation between capabilities and functioning is quite complex (see Nussbaum 2000: p. 86–96). First example: in order for people to develop their functioning capabilities they have to *do* certain things, because it is only by doing things that you acquire the capability to do them (as Aristotle [2003] already pointed out in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a30–31). Second example: if somebody never does a certain thing, for instance making plans and thus exercising the capability of practical reason, one would have reason to suspect that this capability has never been formed. The capability remains in constant need of confirmation in practice. In other words, the assessment of well-being in terms of the thin standard of capabilities can be made only under conditions of their thick deployment in real life (in so far as people are indeed capable).

This inevitable intrusion of functioning thickness (in Geertz's sense, present here in my hermeneutics of the technicity of action) into capabilities as thin standard (in Walzer's sense) has significant implications for the application of this standard. What is assessed when someone, and in particular a practitioner in the professions of spatial arrangement, enquires about the well-being of another person? Although one may adopt Nussbaum's 10 capabilities as standard, one never encounters the bare manifestation of the standard (let alone the sufficient minimum required level of it). Rather, one always encounters (in the terminology of my hermeneutics of human technicity) the capability of bodily technologies as confronted in practice with the specific qualities of an environment, that is, enveloped by and enmeshed in the thickness of understanding existence. Inevitably, this draws the application of a thin standard into the ambit of ambiguity, complexity and indeterminacy typical of

22 That is, designing for the absence of impediments to the exercise of the capabilities.

thickness: only a thick reading of the people in question would be able to provide the most plausible assessment of their well-being in terms of this thin standard. My remarks about the complexity of assessing well-being (see pp. 492–494) should have made this point sufficiently clear.

Does this apparent ascendancy of the hermeneutical thickness of real people's existence not then make the recourse to a thin vision of the standard redundant? I believe not. Up to now, we have concentrated on the paradigmatic situation of people's *present* living conditions. However, practitioners most often work under conditions where the present circumstances of their clients or the beneficiaries of their work are at most only part of their consideration. Two aspects of the situation of the practitioner have to be borne in mind:

(1) Practitioners rarely, if ever, have the luxury of designing for one specific person; in fact, they most often design not only for the client or first users, but also for future owners, future users or the present beneficiary's future self. In short, they design for people they cannot know.²³

(2) They design for the future – that is, in abstraction from the vicissitudes of actual usage; in short, for conditions of use that cannot be known.

These two facts point out the considerable complexity of intervening in people's well-being; yet such complexity must be reduced in order to pursue work in practice. In planning and design professionals cannot avoid the use of generalities (for point 1) and of heuristics (for point 2). In other words, point 1 calls for design with the average or typical person of relevant categories (home-owner, child, patient, movement impaired, spectator, pedestrian, etc.) in mind, or more specifically, it requires eliminating possible impediments to well-being as the average person belonging to any of the relevant categories would experience it. Point 2 calls for maintaining a thick, hermeneutic approach, but only as applied heuristically to likely future use of likely users, which eliminates the possibility of accommodating all possible uses (even imagining that this would be possible) while striving to anticipate problems that may arise once in use. In practical terms, a designer has to ask: given the diverse range of technical capabilities of which people dispose, and given the spatial arrangements that I am planning to produce (that is, external conditions of capabilities), what would be the possible effects on the usage meaning and the symbolic meaning of people frequenting this space? In particular, considering the variety of possible behaviours by a fair range of possible users, what would be the risks of producing obstacles to the realisation of well-being? And again, for which (even unlikely) user would the kind of environment that I am planning amount to an unacceptable hindrance in the exercise of their capabilities?

It is my contention that a good hermeneutics of the technicity of action would be able to sensitise designers and developers to possible forms of usage even before it takes place, and that the integration of the functional capabilities as standard would not only provide the normative measure, but would help practitioners in their inevitable task of reducing the complexity of this situation, and to do so in a responsible way.

Conclusion: qualifying considerations

Whatever the ambiguities in evaluating happiness or well-being may be, it is subject to certain minimal requirements, and the absence of these minimal requirements in a person is likely to make an ethical appeal on others. The hermeneutics of the technicity of action provides us with one particularly useful way of analysing these capabilities – useful for our understanding of well-being in a context that is at least as much technical as it is social and symbolic. Nevertheless, no hermeneutics can provide the final, clear-cut assessment of well-being of any person in a particular place, just as no hermeneutics of poetics gives access to the ultimate meaning of a poem. My claim is that the capabilities approach, integrated with the hermeneutics of the technicity of action, can be developed into a heuristic and normative tool for addressing the essentially ambiguous question of the assessment of well-being in a more responsible way, insofar as (1) it enhances one's sensitivity for the ways in which people may act and react in confrontation with certain milieus, and (2) it

23 The clarification of this matter in the tradition of phenomenological social theory remains invaluable – see Schütz (1964) on the generality implied in 'they-relations' and Berger & Luckmann's (1966) understanding of the 'generalised other'. To some extent, consideration for the generalised other comes into play in the form of legal stipulations to which practitioners have to abide. For current purposes, I simply acknowledge this fact, while assuming that the minimum standards of such stipulations tend to set the bar for well-being too low.

simplifies the process of eliminating normatively undesirable constraints on their ability to act. Such sensitivity and normative application are of essential importance for processes of policy-making, design and research, and for a general orientation with respect to the assessment of and intervention in practical matters of well-being and place – even though some generalisation is unavoidable.

If this case has been made sufficiently through the preceding arguments, it nevertheless should be stressed that this is not a simple ‘happy ending’: the insistence on the hermeneutic complexity of human existence keeps intact the need for judgement (here, with respect of well-being in matters spatial) while proposing ways for making this judgement more thoughtful and relevant to the demands of practice. This points to three important aspects of my argument as a whole.

First, the openness to complexity and ambiguity (typical of the hermeneutic vision of capabilities) and the standard of minimal requirements for well-being stand in a theoretically irresolvable tension. As such, they inform the difficult point in practice where a decision has to be made. And only the practical decision can resolve this tension.²⁴

Second, the present study can certainly be developed further, with reference to discipline-specific input, as each situation of application may require. However, even so, my thick heuristic tool for a thin normative standard of well-being will never be able to overcome all the uncertainties of judgement in practice. In this respect, my argument remains true to an entire tradition of practical philosophy for which recognition of the modest level of certainty with which one can theorise is not only an act of modesty, but a demonstration of understanding the nature of human practice (cf. Aristotle 2003: 1104a7–10). That this uncertainty nevertheless shies away from fatalism and from denying the practical relevance of theorising hardly needs further discussion here.

Third, the present discussion has not resolved the problem of the difference between an internal and an external perspective in the assessment of well-being (see pp. 492–494). Most likely, the argument can be best expanded, not by playing off an ‘internal’ focus against an ‘external’ one, but by dealing with what lies between people, that is, by examining the importance of sharing, discussion, dispute, compromise (for instance between designer and stakeholders). Again, this would not necessarily lead to a problem-free outcome, but it may help to confer legitimacy on our judgements and decisions.

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24 In this sense my argument remains true to the spirit of Ricœur on practical wisdom (Ricœur 1990).

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